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***WORLD WAR I TRENCH WARFARE AND ITS EFFECT ON THE
EUROPEAN SOLDIER-WRITER***

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ABSTRACT (MAXIMUM 200 WORDS) THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH IS TO CONSIDER THE IMPACT OF TRENCH WARFARE ON THE MEN WHO PROSECUTED IT AT "THE WORM'S EYE VIEW." NOVELS FROM ENGLAND, FRANCE AND GERMANY WERE COMPARED TO ASSESS THE NATURE OF THE EFFECT OF TRENCH WARFARE ON SOLDIERS AND TO DETERMINE IF THE EFFECTS WERE UNIVERSAL.			
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: WORLD WAR I TRENCH WARFARE AND ITS EFFECT ON THE EUROPEAN SOLDIER-WRITER

Author: Major Emily J. Elder, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: That the impact of trench warfare during World War I is one that transcended nationality.

Discussion: A comparison of representative literary works by soldiers of the countries engaged in combat on the Western Front reveals a similarity in form, theme and device. Subject to the same pressures and conditions, national identity was subsumed by the commonality of the trench experience.

Preparedness for war varied by country but none was expecting or was ready for the world situation to develop as it did. The naïve enthusiasm of volunteers was matched by that of the untested military careerists of the early 1900s. Trench warfare developed in response to improvements in weapons; this response began during the American Civil War. The British and French separation of fire and movement into distinct stages of the battle meant that soldiers were frequently exposed to uncontested enemy fire. The participants developed the trench system to provide defense against the enemy fires.

The British authors, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon, conform to writer and critic Paul Fussell's conclusion that the major literary movement of WWI was myth-dominated. The authors' novels fit the tripartite organization of the standard romance: the perilous journey, the battle and the jubilant recovery. Both authors use irony as a means of conveying their unmet expectations of society, government and the military establishment.

The French author, Henri Barbusse, describes the realities of trench warfare and its dehumanizing effect on the participants. He also treats the war as a life-changing experience that challenges the survivors to prevent another such conflagration. The German author, the celebrated Erich Maria Remarque, wrote his novel to make sense of his experiences. He writes, as do the others, on the themes of alienation, isolation, sacrifice, mechanization and betrayal by the authorities.

Conclusion: The shared feelings of the survivors were given voice in distinct ways. The British authors take refuge in pastoral settings to recover, Barbusse embraces communism as prevention for future conflicts, Remarque struggles to find his lost youth. The writers risk further alienation by sharing their unpopular experiences and feelings in vain efforts to change society and prevent another world war.

The Great War was a monumental event with devastating effect. Ten million people died during the conflict, a generation of European men. It changed the way people thought, spoke and acted. After four years of unimaginable war, the combatants settled for a brittle peace that contained the seeds of future conflict.¹ This terrible outcome was unknown and unthought of during the idyllic summer of 1914. The sudden and unanticipated onset of war aroused enthusiastic, patriotic reactions among the soon-to-be warring populations. All expected to be at peace by Christmas, all expected to be victorious. Thousands hurried to join the military so as not to miss the excitement; hundreds of thousands would eventually be conscripted to finish the effort.

Among the millions who served in World War I there were sensitive, literary men on both sides of the conflict. The phenomenon of the Western Front engaged many of these men in a restricted and unchanging environment. The reality of their experience, so at odds with their expectations, distanced the soldiers from their countrymen. The horrors they lived through in the trenches isolated and changed them forever. Their efforts to write about their experiences, to reveal their truth about the War, engage us still today.

A comparison of representative literary works by soldiers of the countries engaged in combat on the Western Front reveals a similarity in form, theme and device. Subject to the same pressures and conditions, national identity is subsumed by the commonality of the trench experience. For the common fighting man, sharing the threat of death, the revolutions between rest area and the trench, and the relief at having avoided death inspired similar feelings that found a common outlet with a distinct story. Works from Great Britain, France, and Germany will be compared in terms of the form, themes

¹ John Keegan, *The First World War*, (New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf, 1999), 3-9.

and devices of their works to discern the shared voice of the enlightened, experienced soldier.

The countries involved in the Western Front: France, Germany, Great Britain and, eventually, America, had much in common. France and Germany in particular shared much culture and history as neighbors whose borders were routinely adjusted. The borders of Great Britain are less than 100 miles from France and the country itself had always been engaged in political and cultural exchanges with Europe. America, as a former colony of Great Britain, had many ties with that country and, through immigration, developed numerous connections with the old world.

The Western Front, which ran approximately 475 miles from Nieuport in Belgium to the Swiss border near Freiburg,² wandered through the border areas of Belgium, France and Germany. The distance between the allies and the Germans was never great. The span of the front line averaged roughly four miles, with a no man's land comprising spaces of two to three hundred yards in width; at times the distance was as little as twenty-five yards.³ Throughout the conflict the front changed only slightly until early 1917, when the Germans relocated from the central Somme sector to the Hindenburg lines 20 miles to the rear.⁴ As both sides rotated troops among the front lines, reserve lines and rear rest areas, all of the soldiers involved became very familiar with their sector of the countryside on the Western Front.

For the soldier assigned to the Western Front, life was necessarily limited and certain shared experiences were unavoidable, no matter your nationality. One rotated

² Keegan, 175,182-3.

³ Keegan, 176.

⁴ Paul Braim, *The Test of Battle: The American Expeditionary Forces in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign*, (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 31.

between the lines and the rest areas, only occasionally earning a brief leave for respite at home (officers received leave more regularly than the troops). While in the trenches, life had an appalling, monotonous schedule, intermittently interrupted by infrequent attacks. The daily schedule revolved around “stand to” which occurred during the twilight of dawn and dusk, the most likely times of attack. The awful tension of “stand to” alternated with the loneliness of sentry duty, the boredom of daylight waiting and the arduous nighttime working parties. As with any military experience, the only longed for breaks in the monotony were mealtime and mail call. Sleep was minimal while in the front line trenches and officers, though bearing less of the burden of manual labor, had sentries, working parties and patrols to lead or supervise. Rest areas to the rear of the front lines were not always comfortable and commodious and rest periods were frequently not as restorative as intended.⁵

Preparedness for war varied by country but none was expecting or was ready for the situation to develop as it did. The naïve enthusiasm of volunteers was matched by that of the untested military careerists of the early 1900s.⁶ Even the active service officers were not prepared for the horrors of trench warfare. Trench warfare developed in response to improvements in weapons. During the American Civil War, the introduction of the Minie rifle, self-sealing cartridge and rifled canon spelled the end of the frontal attack. The improved range of the new weaponry extended the killing ground of the battlefield thus increasing the strength of the defense, especially when the defender dug protective positions.⁷ In 1866, the Prussians, armed with breech-loaded rifles, defeated the much-vaunted Austrian Army with their longer-range muzzle-loaders. The breech-

⁵ Charles Messenger, *Trench Fighting 1914-18*, (New York, NY: Ballantine Books Inc., 1972), 36-7.

⁶ Messenger, 6-9.

loaded weapons could be loaded and fired while prone. The prone position offered the shooter the protection of the ground, which enabled him to fire steadily and more accurately than the attacker.⁸ General von Moltke, Chief of Staff of the Prussian Army, determined that frontal attack was not the tactic to achieve victory and that future offenses, “. . . must therefore turn towards the flanks of the enemy’s position.”⁹

The Prussian battles against France in 1870, revealed not only the infeasibility of the frontal assault but also the new Prussian doctrine of continuous fire. The Prussians’ approach was to fix the French forces, then conduct a flank attack, all supported by covering fire.¹⁰ In the ensuing 40 years, French military thinkers, impressed with Prussian aggressiveness, concluded that the key to success on the battlefield was to attack with *élan*. The French thought that the attack would inspire fear in the enemy. Maneuver would threaten the enemy while improving one’s own morale, especially if one moved many troops on a restricted frontage (increased troop density). Colonel Cardot, Chief of the Ecole de Guerre, purported that, “Brave and energetically commanded infantry can march under the most violent fire even against well-defended trenches, and take them.”¹¹ Therefore, the French Army trained to attack in the Napoleonic style, with an emphasis on bayonet fighting.¹²

Great Britain was the slowest to update her tactics. Not having been engaged in a European war since 1815 against Napoleon, Great Britain fought the Boers in 1899, using parade ground tactics that had been successful in years past against unsophisticated native

⁷ Messenger, 9.

⁸ Messenger, 9.

⁹ Messenger, 9.

¹⁰ Messenger, 10.

¹¹ Messenger, 10.

¹² Messenger, 11.

armies. However, the Boers had obtained modern weapons and showed the British Army the dangers of frontal assault. The British ultimately profited from this lesson but did not evolve sufficiently to completely offset German doctrinal advances by the onset of World War I. The British Army valued individual marksmanship and limited individual thinking. Like the German Army, the British strove for a closer relationship between the use of infantry and artillery units. However, the British and the French persisted in dividing the battle into two stages: movement and fire. The severe division of fire and movement meant that soldiers were frequently exposed to uncontested enemy fire.

For all soldiers, indoctrination into the military service served to unite the disparate enlistees into a team. It was a starting point to a new experience for all soldiers. Training varied by country and, as the war progressed, in quality and duration. Tactical training was designed to support the military strategy of the day, which emphasized mobility and maneuver. According to military historian, John Keegan:

Infantry was chiefly exercised in fire and movement, and artillery in the direct support role . . . neither of these two arms, any more than their still very numerous cavalry comrades had been instructed in the tedious, immobile, hole-in-corner business of trench warfare, and none of them was psychologically prepared or physically equipped to wage it.¹³

Overall, however, the majority of participants were instructed in certain similar training, regardless of nationality. Unit effectiveness varied more often due to factors such as regional and personal loyalty, as many units were organized along regional or occupational lines or composed of friends who signed up together (Ex: the Pals Battalions).¹⁴

¹³ Messenger, 6.

¹⁴ Braim, 147.

The sheer scale of the War seemed to minimize the importance of the individual soldier. On both sides of the conflict, soldiers became the nameless pawns of each country's military machine. As the War dragged on and casualties mounted, even replacement troops were themselves replaced. Keegan maintains that all armies have a breaking point, “. . .when those in the fighting units are brought to calculate, accurately or not, that the odds of survival have passed the dividing line between possibility and probability, between the random chance of death and its apparently statistical likelihood.”¹⁵ It was not hard for soldiers to envision themselves as the proverbial cogs in the machine.

Given the above, it is not difficult to imagine that the writings of those who fought in the Great War shared certain qualities. The hallmark aspects of World War I on the Western Front: its suddenness, its randomness, its later air of inevitability, its static nature, the deadly improvements in weapons without corresponding updates to doctrine, its length, the scale and scope of the destruction to both men, materiel and countryside, had a common effect on all of the participants.¹⁶ These aspects of the War, and the experiences of those who endured the trenches on both sides, suggest that the impact of trench warfare is one that transcended nationality. Indeed, one can imagine that all engaged on the Western Front endured similar experiences due to the character of trench warfare. The authors examined here were made famous by their literature generated by their experiences fighting in the trenches of the Western Front.

The soldiers who authored the books selected for review all participated in the trench warfare of World War I. The books were all extremely popular in their day and

¹⁵ Keegan, 346.

¹⁶ Keegan, 7-9.

that popularity is deemed indicative of the storytellers' ability to capture their fellow soldiers' sentiments. Because this paper attempts to link the human reaction to the trench warfare experience, fictional narratives were deemed more appropriate than faithful, detailed recordings of the War. In this case, fiction may be more 'true' than strictly factual accounts. Stories of the war-memoir type may be more easily rendered into a form that represents the "worm's eye view"¹⁷ from the trench. For the soldier-author the war novel or memoir functioned as a means of synthesizing his experience with his expectations. Ernst Junger, the German author of the War World I memoir *The Storm of Steel*, comments on the horrors of war,

Seeing and recognizing are matters, really, of habit. In the case of something quite unknown the eye alone can make nothing of it. So it was that we had to stare again and again at these things that we had never seen before, without being able to give them any meaning. It was too entirely unfamiliar.¹⁸

The authors changed their pre-war habits to incorporate their wartime accounts. They developed a new way of looking at things. Thus, they developed a new understanding of what war is. Writing about one's experience in the War was the author's opportunity not only to express himself but also to communicate the reality of trench warfare to the readers who were not there. The authors stood witness to the events of the War. Their books were both catharsis and revelation; they were also judgments.

THE BRITISH

Robert Graves, the son of a well-known writer, grew up in England on the edges of society's upper crust. He received the education of a gentleman, but had not

¹⁷ Christine Barker and R. W. Last, *Erich Maria Remarque*, (London: Oswald Wolff, Ltd, 1979), 63.

¹⁸ Ernst Junger, *The Storm of Steel*, (New York, NY: Howard Fertig, 1929), 23.

independent means. He had sufficient resources to become an officer when the war started, as opposed to being drafted as an enlisted man. His superior education and mental abilities made him a keen observer of the War. His inclination and success as a poet began before the War; he became well-known for both his prose and his poetry in subsequent years.¹⁹

Siegfried Sassoon was born into a traditional, monied English world that encouraged his twin interests of sport and poetry. Initially a loyal and enthusiastic cavalryman, he soon became disenchanted with the War and suffered enormously from his conflicting feelings of patriotism and pacifism. The remainder of his life was spent working through the polarities engendered in his life by the War.²⁰

In his book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell responded negatively to the conclusion of the noted World War I literary critic, Bernard Bergonzi, which was that the major literary movement of World War I went from a myth-dominated to a demythologized world. In fact, Fussell maintained that the dominant literary movement was *towards* mythic fiction in the, “. . .revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant.”²¹ He believed that veteran writers used the forms and devices of the pre-war era to render their experiences comprehensible to both themselves and their audience.

The structure of these myth and folk narratives is the tripartite form of the romance. Northrop Frye described the threefold organization of the standard romance or quest as the perilous journey, the battle and the jubilant recovery.²² The bases for this

¹⁹ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 203-220.

²⁰ Fussell, 90-92.

²¹ Fussell, 131.

²² Fussell, 130.

model are the Christian and heathen redemption cycles of death, disappearance and revival.²³ This pattern is easily seen in both Robert Graves' *Good-bye to All That* and Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. In both books, this triad is revealed in the soldiers' preparations and movement up to the line, the attack or defense while in the front line trenches, and the celebration of continued life back in the pastoral rest areas. This is clearly stated by Sassoon, who, while on convalescent leave, considered his service up to that point, "Those four weeks . . . now seemed like the First Act of a play . . . like a prelude to some really conclusive sacrifice of high-spirited youth. Act II had carried me along to the fateful First of July. Act III had sent me home to think things over."²⁴ He referred to his training at Flixecourt, followed by the battle of the Somme, then his recovery from illness back in England.

Not only does this triadic sequence set up the structure for the vignettes within the novels but it also offers the common soldier as a sacrificial victim. In Graves' fictionalized memoir, he is shot during a battle for High Wood. In the aftermath of the battle, his wounds are thought mortal and his command writes a letter of condolence to his mother. A chance visitor in the hospital recognizes Graves and reports his recovery. He "dies" for his country and is then, like the Lamb of God, "reborn." Sassoon, a friend and fellow officer, recalls, "I had been feeling much more cheerful lately, for my friend [Graves] had risen again from the dead."²⁵ The soldiers lived constantly with the threat of death and escaping this fate was a part of the mysticism of the romance.

To tell their romance, these writers used the literary device of allegory, or a story within a story, a long favored method to explain universal facts and forces. The tales

²³ Fussell, 128.

²⁴ Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, (London, England: Faber and Faber, 1930), 108.

were not just the experiences, thoughts and feelings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon as they fought the War. The stories were about how war is fought, how it affected the participants and how it was to be endured. The central message was that the War was wrong. The novels told how one successfully survived the War. One must be lucky, yet still pay attention to the smallest detail, as all things had significance. One should have eschewed religion, since God had abandoned those on the battlefield. The soldier should have realized that the machinery of war reduced his life to its most basic animal nature, and that one needed to survive contact with one's own superiors and even one's own countrymen as much as with the enemy (the enemy may have been less dangerous than the homeland).

Graves and Sassoon discussed the conduct of the War on several levels: strategic, operational and tactical. On the national level, both books provided comment on the distant, disconnected and ineffective government. The government, as the cause of England being at war, is principally responsible for all that goes wrong. Soldiers were not interested in the origins of the War and did not allow themselves to have political feelings about the enemy.

The professional soldier's duty was simply to fight whomever the King ordered him to fight . . . The Christmas 1914 fraternization, in which the Battalion was among the first to participate, had had the same professional simplicity: no emotional hiatus, this, but a commonplace of military tradition—an exchange of courtesies between officers of opposing armies.²⁶

However, temporary truces of this nature were later prohibited and the reader sees again that the current conflict did not match the soldiers' concepts of war. They belonged to a

²⁵ Sassoon, 85.

²⁶ Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That*, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1929), 137.

tradition in which Christmas armistices were understandable but they were engaged in a new kind of war, created by the military and sanctioned by the government.

Sassoon noted that he and Graves each had their own attitude toward the War.

My attitude (which had not always been easy to sustain) was that I wanted to have fine feelings about it. I wanted the War to be an impressive experience—terrible, but not horrible enough to interfere with my heroic emotions. [Graves], on the other hand, distrusted sublimation and seemed to want the War to be even uglier than it really was . . . to hear him talk . . . for a good young man to go through Havre or Rouen was a sort of Puritan's Progress from this world to the next.²⁷

In the final pages of his memoir, Sassoon was no longer able to sustain his positive attitude and submitted a statement to the press for publication, “. . . as an act of willful defiance of military authority because [he believes] that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.”²⁸ His loss of faith in the government now complete, Sassoon was saved only by Graves' intervention, when he explained that Sassoon's behavior was the breakdown attendant to heroic action.²⁹

On the operational level, much anger and blame were attached to the Generals as both individuals and as representatives of the whole military establishment. The Generals were reviled for betraying the men who serve under them. Once, the senior officers had been at the level of the trench warriors. Once promoted they callously sent thousands of men, good men, to certain death. They were removed from their men by both distance and understanding. Their removal was both physical and figurative. Their location in the rear prevented them from comprehending the realities of the front line experience.³⁰ The Generals had been in charge of the establishment that created the

²⁷ Sassoon, 100.

²⁸ Sassoon, 194.

²⁹ Graves, 263.

³⁰ Keegan, 312-13.

weaponry but not the techniques with which to employ it; thus, the stalemate on the Western Front. The Generals, as the senior leadership of the military, are directly responsible for the lack of effective doctrine and ineffective strategy that causes the military failures.

The Generals appeared to be fighting a different war altogether. They and their tactics were remnants of the past. Their ties to the past were evident in their inane focus on regimental tradition that supported the out-dated tactics and the harassment of the junior officers. This obsession with history instead of the current conflict resulted in senseless waste. Both writers overtly denied the wastage, but their assertions were undercut by the catalog of hours spent on horse back riding, parades and the silly punishments for new officers or “warts.” The generals had caused the Western Front to be a “. . . treacherous blundering tragic-comedy, which the mentality of the Army had agreed to regard as something between a crude bit of fun and an excuse for a good grumble.”³¹

The ironic tone of these novel-memoirs is impossible to mistake. Irony has been variously defined as “an instrument of truth,” “a manner of discourse where the meaning is contrary to the words,” “the equipoise between the serious and the comic,” or, “as irony of events wherein the expense of effort and resources produces nothing.”³² It implies a consciousness of incongruity between words and their meaning, actions and their results, between appearance and reality. Throughout the novels the authors used irony to convey their unmet expectations of the country, the Army, the War. Not only were the expectations of the individual soldier not met, the expectations of the entire

³¹ Sassoon, 168-9.

³² J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (London, England: Penguin Books, 1976), 335-340.

world were not fulfilled. The Great War, with its scale of death and destruction, confounded everyone's sense of proportion, of reason. Fussell argues that there appears to be, "...one dominating form of modern understanding; that it is essentially ironic; and that it originates largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."³³ Irony is used both on the small and the grand scale throughout these books. Irony allowed the authors to clearly express the illogical execution of a senseless conflict.

The two authors' use of irony differed. Graves' use of irony was closely aligned with farce. It was overt, as when extricating Sassoon from his pacifist episode. Graves complained of the, "...irony of having to argue to these mad old men that Siegfried was not sane!"³⁴ Graves' arrangement of the situations strived for that "equipoise" between the serious and the comedic but developed into farcical situations that caused the reader to join with the author in a sense of disbelief. Is this war really happening? One such story tells about a Private Probert, who joined the Special Reserve for his "health." When the War began and the other special reservists volunteer, Probert refused, finally explaining to the Colonel that he was not afraid, he just did not want to be shot at because he had a wife and pigs at home.³⁵ Not only was the story amusing, it implied that the war is not as important as the pigs.

Sassoon used a gently ironic vision throughout the novel; his juxtaposition of serious and comic elements was never as extreme as Graves.' Occasionally, he used a form of dialectical irony. Sassoon periodically undermined his stories and statements with seemingly innocent questions as he did in this paragraph, in a scene set while on leave in England, "I wondered whether I had exaggerated the 'callous complacency' of

³³ Fussell, 35.

³⁴ Graves, 263.

those at home. What could elderly people do except try and make the best of their inability to sit in a trench and be bombarded? How could they be blamed for refusing to recognize their ignoble elements in the War except those which they attributed to our enemies?”³⁶ He drew the reader in with the first statement, as many countries did not expect any action from the elderly, except perhaps the very thing he described, seeing things correctly. Even elderly people could be asked to or expected to recognize truths. Also, those at home included more than just the elderly. There was the government, the church, conscientious objectors, shirkers, and profiteers. Sassoon did judge these people as callous and complacent. At the front, Sassoon commented on dead bodies that, “. . .such sights must be taken for granted . . .Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull . . .there is nothing remarkable about a dead body in a European War.”³⁷ Sassoon’s positive statement forced the reader to question the repulsive description and realize that such sights could never be taken for granted. Through similar statements, the reader becomes aware that, although Sassoon’s narrative was orderly and in keeping with the “regimental spirit,” he was at odds with the conduct of the War and his participation in it.

Along with the loss of confidence in the government and the Army, the authors revealed a general loss of faith, or at least a faith compromised. The failure of the churches to act in a manner consistent with their professed values caused a cynical response in the fighting forces. The formal religious bodies of the country were shown to be ineffective and easily used for the purposes of destruction. Graves related the role of the church in controlling the enlistment rates of the northern Welsh. At first, the

³⁵ Graves, 75.

³⁶ Sassoon, 210.

congregation prayed for Graves because of the moral dangers, not physical dangers, he would encounter as a soldier. Enlistment lagged in Wales but, once the government manipulated the church to view the War as a holy crusade, enlistments rapidly increased.³⁸ He also related the frustration of the troops who, just before the 'big push,' were admonished about the Battle against Sin (one soldier wonders why they are not permitted to worry about one battle at a time) and who were fed stories of the sacredness of the wayside crucifixes on which, though frequently in the line of fire, the Christ figure was never destroyed. Sassoon commented on the Archbishop of Canterbury, who authorized people to work on the Sabbath. He wondered if the Archbishop had also approved the bombardment of Arras on Easter.³⁹ In Sassoon's mind, the Archbishop's silence on the unjustness of the War, and his approval for fieldwork on the Sabbath, was tantamount to support for it.

As the soldier is faced with a situation in which reality is markedly different than anticipated, he must find a way to reconcile his mental state with the situation. Using the dialectical approach, the soldier can attempt to reconcile his experience with his expectations and achieve resolution and thereby continue to function. For the soldiers of World War I, this reconciliation was both necessary and difficult. The reliable, respected, pre-war forms of authority did not perform their role: the lack of strategy, poor decisions, reckless expenditure of men, inability to respond to the new battlefield situation, all served to sever the trust soldiers once had for their seniors. Their sense of isolation from the authorities was further compounded by their isolation from their fellow countrymen at home. Brian Rhys, in his Introduction to *Under Fire*, mentioned the

³⁷ Sassoon, 148-150.

³⁸ Graves, 188.

psychological wall between civilians and soldiers.⁴⁰ It has existed forever but the extraordinary scope and scale of this war increased the effect exponentially.

The industrial flavor of the War, with its assembly-line training, interchangeable officers and soldiers and large-scale death, reduced their humanity and numbed the participants to all but the need for survival. Sassoon wondered if he should even try to keep intelligence alive when he cannot call his life his own. Both authors restored themselves in the pastoral setting; Graves in Wales and Sassoon at Butley. In a rural setting away from the trenches, Sassoon could, “. . .discard [his] personal relationship with the military machine and its ant-like armies.”⁴¹ He continued the insect image again when directed to carry out a ridiculous mission, “I see myself merely as a blundering flustered little beetle . . . a squashed beetle in a cellar.”⁴²

The soldiers were alone, together. Unable to rely on their leadership to save them and misunderstood at home, they developed a sense of isolation that contributed to their ‘opposition’ with all but fellow soldiers.

Any man who had been on active service had an unfair advantage over those who hadn’t. And the man who had really endured the War at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers. The Front line is the only place where you can escape the war. We were the survivors; few among us would ever tell the truth to our friends and relations in England. We were carrying something in our heads which belonged to us alone, and to those we had left behind us in the battle.⁴³

³⁹ Sassoon, 168.

⁴⁰ Barbusse, *Under Fire*, (London, England: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1926), xiii.

⁴¹ Sassoon, 177.

⁴² Sassoon, 150.

⁴³ Sassoon, 161, 177, 195.

Sharing the discomforts and the danger was important to the authors, they had only each other to rely on, and only by staying together could they hope to emerge alive and functioning.

THE FRENCH

Henri Barbusse, the author of *Under Fire*, was 20 years older than Sassoon and Graves when he fought in the trenches of the Western Front. Barbusse enlisted in the army and fought as a private soldier, not an officer. *Under Fire*, which was written in 1916, and published in 1917, was based on Barbusse's war diaries. Barbusse had been a writer prior to the war. He had published poems and novels and considered himself a poetic realist. When war was declared, Barbusse signed up immediately, although his health exempted him from obligated service and he was an acknowledged humanitarian and pacifist.⁴⁴ He fought well and returned to the war after being twice injured. After his third injury, he was invalided home and wrote *Under Fire* while convalescing. In 1917, he was awarded the Goncourt Prize for the novel. In subsequent years, he aligned himself with the Communist Party and continued writing and editing journals, his style changing throughout the years but always with the subject of establishing a better world.⁴⁵

The British books, which blur the line between memoir and fiction, approximately follow the sequence of the authors' lives, at least to the point where they confuse some

⁴⁴ Barbusse, v-viii.

⁴⁵ Barbusse,

readers into thinking that the books are autobiographical.⁴⁶ Barbusse's novel, on the other hand, is obviously not an autobiography. The pace and plot of the book clearly indicate its fictional status. The original work's (French) subtitle is "the story of a squad" and the characters and incidents are not the random results of fate but rather carefully designed elements with a particular purpose. One remembers, when comparing *Under Fire* with *Good-bye to All That* and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, that the French have had a more revolutionary history, which permitted novels to be more direct in challenging the status quo and that the British, with their dedication to the establishment and emphasis on 'good form,' put forth challenging texts more obliquely. Allegory was not necessary for Barbusse. He was terribly graphic in his descriptions and direct in presenting his message.

In Barbusse, men were forced to play, "...that sort of madman's part imposed on all men by the madness of the human race."⁴⁷ War was, perhaps, inevitable but still it was only bearable if it brought about a better world. His experiences in the trenches lead him to examine the relationships among men. Barbusse may have blamed the existing hierarchy of the country for involving innocent men in wholesale slaughter (a term used repeatedly), but he did not excuse himself or his fellow men from their future role of preventing such disaster from happening again. Participation in the War, and the knowledge gained from that experience, conferred an obligation on the survivors to prevent another such conflagration.

The subject matter covered is, like the previous works, a close description of the realities of trench warfare, but the purpose of the novel was to enlighten. There was not

⁴⁶ Fussell, 104-5, 203.

⁴⁷ Barbusse, 242.

the attempt at entertainment that figured so prominently in Graves or so understatedly in Sassoon. In the opening chapter the author introduced the squad around whom the drama will revolve. They were representative characters and stood as symbols for all soldiers. In the beginning, Barbusse described their various appearances. All were dressed uniquely to protect and warm themselves. Their differing states of dress reflected their humanity and individuality. “Thus do they exercise their wits, according to their intelligence, their vivacity, their resources, and their boldness, in the struggle with the terrible discomfort. Each one seems to make the revealing declaration, ‘This is all that I knew, all I was able, all that I dared to do in the great misery which has befallen me.’”⁴⁸ They were conscious of their differences and revel in their uniqueness. “ ‘I say, we don’t resemble each other much.’ ‘Why should we?’ says Lamuse. ‘It would be a miracle if we did.’”⁴⁹

They may have been a product of the country’s military machinery but at the commencement of the novel they were all individual men. As Barbusse described their varying backgrounds, he reminded the reader that soldiers are not machines. They did not emerge unscathed from such an experience. They distinguished themselves from the Africans, whom they called real soldiers. Of themselves they say, “We are not soldiers, we’re men.”⁵⁰ Their bid for individuality was how they attempted to maintain their humanity in the devastating environment.

However, the War was a “mechanical cataclysm” and “the fury of fatal engines”⁵¹ had a diminishing effect on them. Though they were recognizable as individuals, they

⁴⁸ Barbusse, 14.

⁴⁹ Barbusse, 14.

⁵⁰ Barbusse, p44.

⁵¹ Barbusse, p271

were reduced to their most basic form. “They are simple men further simplified, in whom the merely primitive instincts have been accentuated by the force of circumstances—the instinct of self-preservation, the hard-gripped hope of living through, the joy of food, of drink and of sleep.”⁵² They were like animals that want only to eat, sleep and to feel the pleasure of physical love. In the trench they were like, “. . .cattle enclosed,” they get, “. . .herded outside, like sheep.”⁵³ Barbusse talked about a stray dog that attached itself to the men, “He is weary and disgusted with life. Even if he has escaped the bullet or the bomb to which he is as much exposed as we, he will end by dying here. Fouillade puts his thin hand on the dog’s head, and it gazed at him again. Their two glances are alike—the only difference is that one comes from above and the other from below.”⁵⁴ Not only does Barbusse associate Fouillade the soldier with the dog in their similar glances, but the voice of the dog was also like that of the soldier. Readers learn that Fouillade was weary and disgusted with life; that was the effect of the War on the Western Front.

The soldiers, with their reduced expectations, developed a credo over the past year and a half, “Give up trying to understand, and give up trying to be yourself. Hope that you will not die, and fight for life as well as you can.”⁵⁵ The squad realized that they were on their own; the institutions of the state would not be a part of their survival. They were insignificant, “What is a soldier, or even several soldiers? —Nothing, and less than nothing, . . .among all this flood of men and things.”⁵⁶ They must save themselves since

⁵² Barbusse, 44.

⁵³ Barbusse, 25, 72.

⁵⁴ Barbusse, 135.

⁵⁵ Barbusse, 27.

⁵⁶ Barbusse, 25.

they were not important enough, in the eyes of their country, to be saved by the authorities.

They relied on each other to maintain their humanity within the squalor of the trench experience. Corporal Bertrand, who stood in the narrator's eyes as one of those, " . . . who incarnate a lofty moral conception," recognized the lot of the soldier. He told the squad:

The work of the future will be to wipe out the present . . . And yet—this present—it had to be . . . Shame on military glory, shame on armies, shame on the soldier's calling, that changes men by turns into stupid victims or ignoble brutes. Yes, shame. That's the true word. It will be true when there is a Bible that is entirely true, when it is found written among the other truths that a purified mind will at the same time let us understand. We are still lost."⁵⁷

They, the participants of the Great War, might have been forever lost but they were sacrificed to a good cause, they were the price paid for others to have a better life in the future.

By the end of the novel the War had almost conquered all of these men, their experiences changed them to the point where they could no longer recognize each other.

Not far from us there are some stranded and sleeping hulks so moulded in mud from head to foot that they are almost transformed into inanimate objects. Since the beginning we have seen each other in all manner of shapes and appearances, and yet—we do not know each other. We cannot decide the identity of these beings, . . . all these earth-charged men who you would say were carrying their own winding-sheets are as much alike as if they were naked. Out of the horror of the night, apparitions are issuing from this side and that who are clad in exactly the same uniform of misery and filth."⁵⁸

All men, the Allies and the enemy, are alike in the end.

⁵⁷ Barbusse, 257.

⁵⁸ Barbusse, 320-322.

The likeness of the combatants, allied and enemy, was emphasized during a scene that also reflected on the value of religion. A downed pilot related to those at the dressing station the sight that caused his crash. He had been flying an observation mission that took him over two groups, one on either side of no man's land. Closer inspection revealed that two identical church services were being carried on. He flew too close and crashed. The pilot was able to hear the groups as he went down, both were saying, "God is with us!" He wondered what God thought of these identical statements from opposite sides. But there is only one God; why did God let the combatants believe that he was with one and not the other?⁵⁹ The pilot understood how the men could confuse the issue, how they could send their separate prayers to the Lord. What he could not understand was how God answered both requests. He concluded that God could not grant the prayers of the soldiers, since they were in opposition. Further, God or religion failed to make this situation clear to everyone. The message was: God failed. Statements from other wounded soldiers further amplified this point, "To say that all this innocent suffering could come from a perfect God, it's damned skull-stuffing. I don't believe in God because of the cold . . . men become corpses bit by bit, just simply with cold."⁶⁰ A fair and just God would not have allowed the situation to exist. Punishment should have been visited upon sinners, not these victims.

Their faith in God was replaced by their faith in each other. There was still such a thing as hell but they no longer had a vision of heaven. The hell they experienced was a

⁵⁹ Barbusse, 282.

⁶⁰ Barbusse, 284.

man-made thing and luck played a greater role in determining their survival than any ecclesiastical force. “They carry the luck of their survival as it were glory.”⁶¹

Like the British, the French soldiers’ special knowledge and role as sacrificial victims isolated them from the rest of their countrymen. They could not communicate truthfully with the civilians they chanced to meet during a rare liberty opportunity. When asked by a woman to confirm a false impression of the trenches, they could not help but reinforce her mistake. They knew they were contributing to the divide between soldier and civilian but the divide was already too great to bridge. It was evident in the form of her question. She did not ask what the trenches were like; she asked them to agree with her view. They knew that she, and the rest of the noncombatants, did not want to know what war was really like.

The soldiers were not treated well by the populace they endeavored to protect. This enhanced their presentation as sacrificial victims. In one of the terrible pictures of the War, the local French profited from the soldiers by charging exorbitant rates for their simple pleasures during their rest periods. This was worse than the images of profiteers in the British novels; those profiteers were distant from the war zone. Here, fellow countrymen faced the soldiers in their exhaustion and deprivation and thought only of themselves and money.⁶² This image underscored the theme that the soldiers’ lives were of little value, even to the people whom they fought to protect.

The soldiers were uncomfortable in the clean and beautiful town and reminded themselves frequently that they could get used to it again. The town was untouched by the War and the idea was that they, too, could return to such a life. The truth was that

⁶¹ Barbusse, 253.

⁶² Barbusse, 73.

they could never lead their lives as they had before the War. They had been changed by the War and they had to live with those changes forever.

The sight of this world has revealed a great truth to us at last, nor could we avoid it: a Difference which becomes evident between human beings, a Difference far deeper than that of nations and with defensive trenches more impregnable; the clean-cut and truly unpardonable division that there is in a country's inhabitants between those who gain and those who grieve, those who are required to sacrifice all, all, to give their numbers and strength and suffering to the last limit, those upon whom the others walk and advance, smile and succeed."⁶³

The soldiers had only each other. There was no danger that they would not risk to save each other. When one of their squad died, it was as if they had encountered their own destruction. They recognized that the German soldiers were the same. " 'We talk about the dirty Boche race; but as for the common soldier, I don't know if it's true or whether we're coddled about that as well, and if at bottom they're not men pretty much like us.' 'Probably they're men like us,'" is the reply.⁶⁴ Again, the soldier was isolated from the civilians even to the extent that they had more in common with the enemy than with their own countrymen. No one at home would believe their stories even if they could tell them, but this was a shared experience with all soldiers.

Trudi Tate, in her book *Modernism, History and the First World War*, noted the repeated references in *Under Fire* to the paradoxes of similarity and difference. In Barbusse's novel, the men lost the external markings that distinguished one from another. They became more *like*, which was viewed as a positive change, as they become more "primeval," or more human. "Barbusse keeps returning to the idea of equality-understood partly as *sameness*, whereby foreign men, including the present enemy, are

⁶³ Barbusse, 301.

⁶⁴ Barbusse, 31.

recognized as the same as ‘us.’”⁶⁵ This similarity was the basis for the consideration that the soldiers showed the enemy at the end of the novel. Barbusse’s soldiers “. . . resolve to build a new world order on the ruins of the war, recognizing the common interest amongst the men who have been sent to fight-and die-in a war that seems to serve none of their interests.”⁶⁶ The members of the squad were already changed; they learned the lesson that war is wrong. Their participation provided them with new insight about what was right and what was wrong, that was why the burden of changing the world was conferred on them.

The final chapter of the novel is entitled “Dawn.” It is the dawn of reason and understanding. At the end of the book, the soldiers realized that what matters is the, “. . . understanding between democracies, the entente among the multitudes, the uplifting of the people of the world, the bluntly simple faith!”⁶⁷ This understanding was powerful and it was their task to make these possibilities become reality. In this way, “. . . dawn comes once again to cleanse this earthly Gehenna.”⁶⁸

THE GERMAN

When Erich Maria Remarque wrote *All Quiet on the Western Front* in 1928, he was writing in opposition to an established tradition of German literature that espoused war as “. . . a moral and patriotic source of individual rebirth.”⁶⁹ For Remarque, the War lasted too long to be a positive experience. Remarque wrote *All Quiet on the Western*

⁶⁵ Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1998), 71-72.

⁶⁶ Tate, 75.

⁶⁷ Barbusse, 342

⁶⁸ Barbusse, 227.

⁶⁹ Richard A. Firda, *All Quiet on the Western Front: Literary Analysis and Cultural Context*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), 51.

Front for *erlosung*, or release. He wrote for the generation of soldiers who returned from the War, for those who, “. . .were unable to believe in Democracy, Socialism or the League of Nations.”⁷⁰

Remarque was not from a prosperous family and was studying to be a teacher, one of the few professional opportunities available to him, when he was drafted in 1916. He was injured in the summer of 1918, and returned to the battlefield four days before the armistice was signed. For the next ten years he worked at various jobs until writing *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which sold a million and a half copies in its first year of publication. Remarque lived in America and Switzerland after losing his German citizenship due to his controversial writing. He continued to write on the subject of war and its effects until his death in 1970.⁷¹

All Quiet on the Western Front shared with the three previously discussed novels the themes of alienation, isolation, sacrifice, mechanization, and betrayal by the authorities. Although certain themes are common, this novel does not repeat the tripartite structure of the romance. Rather, the book seemed to spiral downward in an increasingly dismal whirl. The impressionistic, fragmented scenes were not set in the journey, battle, and recovery sequence. Instead, the scenes had their own order, alternating light and dark moods, one that changed pace to reflect the degeneration of the main character.⁷² The occasional use of threes was not romantic, “Yesterday we were under fire, to-day we act the fool and go foraging through the countryside, to-morrow we go up to the trenches again,” or, “trenches, hospitals, the common grave—there are no other possibilities.”⁷³ It

⁷⁰ Firda, 48.

⁷¹ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (Lincoln: Cliffs Notes, Inc., 1995), 5-10.

⁷² Firda, 41-2, 50.

⁷³ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1928), 138, 283.

was the romantic triad out of sequence. The arrangement was hopeless; since it ended without joy, there was just the promise of more misery ahead.

A primary theme in this novel was that of youth sacrificed. Paul Baumer, the narrator of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, was one of a group of friends that signed up together. They were convinced to do so by one of their teachers who lectured them until they all enlisted. One of the group particularly did not want to go but signed up three months before he would have been drafted, at the teacher's urging. The boy, Joseph Beym, was blinded in battle and became the first of the group to die. The others held their teacher, Kantorek, responsible. Kantorek was a representative figure for the adults who supported the war and sent the young off to fight.

Remarque described an "us" versus "them" relationship between the youthful war fighters and the responsible adults. According to Richard Firda, who has written several analyses of this novel, the division between the young soldiers and the adults resulted in several effects: the boys formed a bond to protect themselves and each other from the maddening effects of the War, the boys' authority figures lost their validity and the soldiers were cut off from both the past and the future.⁷⁴ The description of the comrades as lost figures with no past and no future was repeated throughout the novel. The adults were held directly responsible for this outcome.

Paul presented the authorities as failures rather than as bad people, . . . "no one had the vaguest idea what we were in for."⁷⁵ However, the Kantoreks of the world should have lead their youth to a productive future. "There were thousands of Kantoreks, all of whom were convinced that they were acting for the best—in a way that cost them

⁷⁴ Firda, 51-55.

⁷⁵ Remarque, 11.

nothing. And that is why they let us down so badly.”⁷⁶ They did not fulfill their adult requirements so the young men’s belief in the insight and wisdom of their elders was shattered, if not during the brutality of recruit training, then definitely upon contact with the enemy.⁷⁷ The bitter realization that the cost of this flawed thinking was borne by the youth made them twice victims. The boys did their part; the rest of the country did not. In a reversal of fortunes that underscored the ineffectiveness of the authorities, Kantorek became a Territorial soldier and ended up under the command of one of his former students. The soldiers noted that Kantorek was not even a good teacher, he taught them French, “. . .with which afterwards we made so little headway in France.”⁷⁸ This outlook maintained the responsibility for the conduct of the War with the adults.

The soldiers’ feelings of betrayal were most easily vented at the Army. The boys were eager to go to training and become soldiers in defense of their homeland but Paul claimed that training killed that emotion. Training required them to renounce their personality, which set them apart as individuals. “At first astonished, then embittered, and finally indifferent, we recognized that what matters is not the mind.”⁷⁹ Basic training was brutal and makes them, . . . “hard, suspicious, pitiless, vicious, tough.”⁸⁰ Without this training they would not have stayed sane in the trenches but the soldiers realized that such lack of feeling came at a price. They were soldiers first and “shamefaced” individual men second.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Remarque, 12.

⁷⁷ Remarque, 12-13.

⁷⁸ Remarque, 176.

⁷⁹ Remarque, 22.

⁸⁰ Remarque, 26.

⁸¹ Firda, 56.

Being at the Western Front was a dehumanizing experience. “We reach the zone where the front begins and become on the instant human animals.”⁸² The changes they went through as soldiers that started during basic training continued to degenerated them into simple animals whose role in life was clear. The Army did not require them to think, it required that they kill on command, live in the dirt, and survive on minimal, poor quality food. They became like beasts during the battles, wanting only to live, not fighting so much as saving themselves from destruction. Himmelstoss acted like a dog, he “barks,” “crouches” and “shows his teeth like a cur.” Paul grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and kicked him in the ribs.⁸³ They turned into animals when they went to the front line which “gives them the weapon of instinct . . .the indifference of wild creatures.”⁸⁴ This reduction from human to animal was mostly helpful but occasionally they still felt terrible yearnings for a better life. “Those are the dangerous moments. They show us that the adjustment is only artificial, that it is not simple rest, but sharpest struggle for rest . . . our inner forces are not exerted toward regeneration, but toward degeneration . . .we are primitive in an artificial sense, and by virtue of the utmost effort.”⁸⁵ The soldiers were in constant turmoil and were nowhere at rest. Even when they were away from the front lines they were troubled by thoughts of what peace would be like. They did not anticipate an end to the War. Occasionally, they talked of it and such thoughts stirred great confusion. They could not reconcile their current selves with their past experiences. As young men, they knew only school. Now, school seemed useless and they could not imagine themselves having narrow careers in their hometown,

⁸² Remarque, 56.

⁸³ Remarque, 132.

⁸⁴ Remarque, 274

⁸⁵ Remarque, 274.

but they had no other vision of peace. These thoughts repeated the themes of isolation and sacrifice.

These soldiers, like those in the French and British novels, felt cut off from their countrymen. They did not have many opportunities to visit their homes. Paul received leave, with a follow-on assignment of six weeks of refresher training. He was loath to leave his friends, he was afraid something would happen to them while he was gone. When he did arrive home, he felt out of place. He tried on his old clothes, anxious to fit in, but he had outgrown them. He acknowledged that the people in his hometown had all stayed the same; it was he who had changed. He could not discuss the War with his mother. “You would not understand, you could never realize it. And you shall never realize it. Was it bad, you ask.-You, Mother,--I shake my head and say: “No, Mother, not so very. There are always a lot of us together so it isn’t so bad.”⁸⁶ Paul lied to his mother and did not want to talk about the War even to his father. He was afraid it would make the horrors of the front too real for him to handle.

The people at home were full of good will but, as in Barbusse, the folks in the rear did not want to hear news of the front that was contrary to their preconceptions. They preferred to think that the best was provided to their soldiers on the front, that they in the rear were the ones who suffered. The inexperienced German teacher offered Paul advice about where to make the break-through on the front. When Paul countered his advice with the statement that the war may be different than everyone thought, the teacher replied that Paul, and the average soldier, knew nothing about it. As they part he said, “I hope we will soon hear something worth while from you.”⁸⁷ He did not want to hear

⁸⁶ Remarque, 161.

⁸⁷ Remarque, 168.

what the young soldier had to say; Paul's truths disturbed his equilibrium. If he believed Paul, he would have had to doubt himself, then he, too, would have been in Paul's position. For Paul the situation was equally untenable. "They are different men here, men I cannot properly understand, whom I envy and despise."⁸⁸ His sojourn at home was not spent joyously celebrating his existence. Even at home he questioned what he had become, that he was so different from everyone and how would he ever possibly return to this life. He concluded his leave period thinking, "What is leave? —A pause that only makes every thing after it so much worse."⁸⁹

The isolation of the soldiers from their fellow Germans, including their families, drew them ever closer to their comrades in arms. This alienation from their former life began with their basic training and was where the bonds with other soldiers started. "By far the most important result was that [the training] awakened in us a strong, practical sense of esprit de corps, which in the field developed into the finest thing that arose out of the war—comradeship."⁹⁰ The soldiers had one another upon which they relied. Paul, especially, was very dependent on Kat as a father figure. Kat explained how to stay alive and was always ready to bolster everyone's flagging spirits. His death, after the deaths of so many of their fellows, struck a deep blow to Paul's psyche.⁹¹

The soldiers' isolation from their fellow countrymen was exaggerated by their likeness to the enemy soldiers. "It is strange to see these enemies of ours . . . They look just as kindly as our own peasants in Friesland."⁹² Following the inspection by the Kaiser, Paul and his fellow soldiers discussed the War and its cause. They did not know

⁸⁸ Remarque, 169.

⁸⁹ Remarque, 179.

⁹⁰ Remarque, 26-7.

⁹¹ Remarque, 291; Firda, 51.

exactly who started it or why. Albert contended that the French were just like themselves, not eager for war and only following the dictates of their rulers. Their lack of knowledge underscored their innocence. They were damaged by the War, not just physically but mentally as well. They realized the bond they shared with the enemy soldiers who were easier to comprehend than their fellow countrymen who constructed the War.

Irony existed even in this morbid, impressionistic novel. “It is true we have no right to this windfall (double rations). The Prussian is not so generous. We have only a miscalculation to thank for it.”⁹³ The German miscalculation being, of course, that the line would stay quiet. The supply system requisitioned food for an entire company but, as so often happened in the War, the enemy bombarded the line and many were killed, resulting in double rations for the survivors. In another scene, the soldiers marched to the front line prior to battle and passed a stack of new coffins, prepositioned for the coming assault. This was one time where the efficiency of the army was noted. Normally, the army was not efficient, for generally food and ammunition was in short supply, and the artillery weapons became so worn that the rounds dropped short, injuring more of the Germans than the enemy.⁹⁴

Unlike the other novels, in this book the characters all died. As the novel proceeded toward the end of the War, the deaths increased in number and frequency. It was not just Paul and his friends who were marked for death; the replacement soldiers were less and less capable and were killed very easily. The ever-mounting detritus of the War indicated that the system causing the destruction was itself being destroyed.

⁹² Remarque, 190.

⁹³ Remarque, 2.

Paul remembered the peaceful, pastoral settings of his youth but with sorrow, not joy; those things belonged to a world that no longer existed. The aftermath of battle was not exultation. He felt no joy that he survived. He remembered with pain what he had been and the life and dreams he had before the war. “Here in the trenches they are completely lost to us. They arise no more; we are dead and they stand remote on the horizon, they are a mysterious reflection, an apparition, that haunts us, that we fear and love without hope. They are strong and our desire is strong—but they are unattainable, and we know it.”⁹⁵ These thoughts foreshadowed his death. If he was so lost to hope, he would not be able to live in the world again.

It was not any recognition of their beauty and their significance that attracted us, but the communion, the feeling of a comradeship with the things and events of our existence, which cut us off and made the world of our parents a thing incomprehensible to us—for then we surrendered ourselves to events and were lost in them, and the least little thing was enough to carry us down the stream of eternity.⁹⁶

The youthful figures engaged with the events of the day, in this they had no choice. They gave themselves up to the situation and were swept away from their future by larger forces. Even if they had wanted to allocate blame, it would not have saved them; their future was lost.

CONCLUSION

The authors examined for this paper had a shared thesis: that the pre-war authorities created something disastrous and it could not be permitted to happen ever again. Their own experiences were proof of the havoc wrought by state institutions

⁹⁴ Remarque, 100, 280 .

⁹⁵ Remarque, 121.

during the War. The authors were forever changed, forever haunted by their encounters with death and the limits to which they would go to survive. Their changed or lost status was evident in their common literary motifs and in the devices found in all of the novels. However, it was an international message spoken in separate national voices.

Though their reactions to the trench experience were similar, their response was not. They all felt isolated from the world of human sense and feeling, alienated from community with their fellow countrymen, at war with reason. Unlike their countrymen at home, they respected the abilities of the enemy and understood that those they fought were greatly like themselves, fellow victims in a shared catastrophe. The ones they were closest to physically and most like mentally were the subjects of their destructive efforts. Separated by experience from the ones they loved and those they looked to for guidance, the soldiers had only each other upon which to rely.

The soldiers all attempted to maintain their sense of themselves as men during the dehumanizing War. Graves refused to join in the physical pleasures available at the front. He approached the War as a test, a ‘pilgrims progress’ through the iniquities of life. Though he had foresworn formal religion, he lived by a code whereby his succor is moral in nature.

Sassoon, often referred to as a ‘fox-hunting man’ as he had earlier published fictionalized ‘memoirs’ under that title, was connected by birth and upbringing to the countryside. His refuge took the form of retreat, either actual or in memory, to the pastoral setting. Sassoon was not part of the War and its “ant-like army” while in the pastoral setting.

⁹⁶ Remarque, 122.

Barbusse's stock characters suffered variously throughout the novel. Some existed just to demonstrate the totality of the devastation when they were killed. Still others survived and continued to fight. They began to understand the important task ahead of them; their plans for the future gave them strength. Indeed, Barbusse actively worked towards a better world for all mankind after the war. Remarque's lost youths were marked for destruction early on. Though they came willingly to fight for their homeland, and suffered much over three years, they lost hope almost immediately. Their association of authority with, "... greater insight and a more humane wisdom ..." was destroyed during their first bombardment by the enemy.⁹⁷ Remarque and his contemporaries were left aimlessly searching for purpose and meaning in their lives.

Literary reflections by trench soldiers on their Great War experiences were interesting phenomena. They clearly articulated how impossible it was to share their experience with anyone not present. As Sassoon noted, "We were the survivors; few among us would ever tell the truth to our friends and relations in England. We were carrying something in our heads which belonged to us alone, and to those we had left behind us in the battle."⁹⁸ And yet they did come forth and tell these truths. For the British, the formality and rigid hierarchy of their society could not be overthrown in one war. Sassoon spent the rest of his life ruminating on and writing about his reactions to the violent times of his life. As Fussell related, Sassoon began a, "... splendid war on the war ..." by publishing anti-war poetry, ultimately dedicating forty years to writing, comparing his pre- and post-war lives. Graves literally did say good-bye to all that when he left England to live in Majorca. At the end of his novel he wrote,

⁹⁷ Remarque, 12-13.

⁹⁸ Sassoon, 161.

If condemned to relive those lost years I should probably behave again in very much the same way; a conditioning in the Protestant morality of the English governing classes, though qualified by mixed blood, a rebellious nature and an over-riding poetic obsession, is not easily outgrown.”¹⁰⁰

Graves may be changed forever by his wartime adventures but he could not deny his upbringing and position in the British hierarchy. He was changed by the War but he himself could not effect greater change in himself or English society. Therefore, he left his homeland and, hence, the title of his book. It seemed to be more effective to write books that communicated a message of change than to advocate it personally.

Barbusse changed his own life and sought actively to change others. He had new beliefs and goals for his fellow man; writing was his method of engaging them. He was very politically active, dedicated to creating one continental country with moral and intellectual traditions and no frontiers.¹⁰¹ Remarque’s response was more personal. He became a militant pacifist and a famous recorder of human heroism in the face of horror.¹⁰² He protested the onset of World War II but did not take an active role in that conflict.

The traditional values that brought about their participation in the Great War led to great disaster. Therefore, those values or authority systems had to be replaced. The authors and the characters were agents of change; they had to share their story to affect a new order. They wrote for the same reason that they fought—for each other. The British fought for the Regiment, Barbusse for the squad, Remarque for lost German youth.

⁹⁹ Fussell, 91.

¹⁰⁰ Graves, 347.

¹⁰¹ Barbusse, xii.

“I was rewarded by an intense memory of men whose courage had shown me the power of the human spirit—that spirit which could withstand the utmost assault. Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad and they outweighed all the failures. Against the background of the War and its brutal stupidity those men had stood glorified by the thing which sought to destroy them.”¹⁰³

They fought for their fellow man, those who were, in the end, bigger than that which they represented. They continued to fight for him through their literature. The War was neither glorious nor quick, every expectation was in vain, all trust destroyed and they were left with only an ironic vision, the realization of the need for change and love for their fellow man.

¹⁰² Seymour-Smith, *The New Guide to Modern World Literature*, (New York, NY: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1985), 602.

¹⁰³ Sassoon, p174.

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